“Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students in the College Setting”

As a Special Education/Early Childhood Education Major with a concentration in Deaf Education, I’ve always been interested in deaf culture and deaf inclusion. Up until I started college, the only first-hand experience I had with deaf culture was in the high school setting. Since I have started attending Bloomsburg University, I have seen a few deaf/hard of hearing students around campus, and it has brought me much interest in how the college experience for these students differs from that of hearing students. Through interviewing both deaf/hard of hearing and hearing students, I have gained a greater understanding of how each group perceives the other, and how that affects their college experience as a whole.

I started out understanding the hearing student’s experience through a number of sources: my own experience thus far as a freshman, interviewing other people within my freshman class, and Nathan’s “My Freshman Year”. There were many overlapping themes throughout these sources; however there were a lot of differences as well. For example, from “My Freshman Year”, I gathered that many groups that were considered “different” (whether due to race or disability) were isolated to people like themselves. When I interviewed people within my freshman class, I found something completely opposite. They said they “would approach” deaf students and would “try and find a way to communicate without talking”. This goes against what Nathan implies about hearing students in the college setting. I know from my own personal experience with deaf/hard of hearing students that I will not immediately go up and approach them because I feel insecure in my own American Sign Language abilities, but eventually try and make an introduction for myself.

I then interviewed a deaf friend of mine who will coincidentally be attending Bloomsburg University for the first time starting spring semester. I asked him questions about how he felt around hearing students, if it was hard to make friends with hearing students, and what method of communication he resorts to when a person doesn’t know sign language. His answers were as follows:

“*I just feel normal. Hearing people tend to misunderstand easily when I use gestures. The vibe I get from them is something different than I have in the past, meaning I wouldn't continue chatting with them unless they are familiar with being around with deaf people.* *It isn’t hard to make friends with hearing students if they know American Sign Language, but that is not always the case. I tend to use my smartphone to use as communication with them if they don’t know ASL, or I use gestures sometimes.*”

He seemed very open to making friends with hearing students, despite his impairment. This brings up the question “If both sides are willing to approach each other, then why isn’t it happening as often as it should?” I think this is because as college students we like to think of ourselves as entering a new time in our lives where we will be more outgoing and friendly, when in reality, the shadow of our former self still raises to the surface. Change in ourselves for the better is what we hope for, and most of the time we end up not changing at all, or if not, only a little bit.

I also asked him about college drinking, and his likeliness to drink as a means of common ground with hearing students. He told me he “would because life is short”, and when asked if he thought deaf students drank a lot in college he replied: “Of course they do, just like hearing people, because it’s college life.” In a journal I found staggering statistics on college drinking among deaf/hard of hearing students. In a survey of these students, 91.4% of them said they consumed alcohol in the past year, and 91.7% of male students and 84.3% of female students saw drinking as central to their social lives (Mason T, Schiller J, 2009). Comparing this to the student I interviewed, it seems pretty accurate.

Depending on whether or not deaf students have had interaction with other deaf people as children, it can affect their identity exploration and even lead to isolation and loneliness later in life (Lukomski J, 2007). This can lead to dropping out of college, in most extreme cases.

Another study informed me that the dropout rate among deaf college students is high, due to limited personal resources and lack of socialization (Albertini J, Kelly R, Matchett M, 2012). With greater social satisfaction comes persistence, and without it, students lose interest and end up dropping out. My deaf student that I interviewed was surprised by this information when I told him, and he said it can be due to more than just that: “money issues, personal reasons and others.” This connects to stereotyping. In his words:

“*I hate stereotypes in general. People need to get to know others before they judge. And I understand that there is a communication barrier between a lot of deaf/hard of hearing students and hearing students, but there is still no reason to judge. I cannot talk at all. However, I am told that I am an intelligent person and have a lot to offer the world.*”

In conclusion, deaf/hard of hearing students have a different, yet the same experience as hearing students. They all want the same thing: to be accepted and to excel academically. However, the language barrier poses many problems in a college where the majority of the students and teachers are hearing.

Sources Cited:

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